

The Purely Ethical Gospel.

Examined.



BY

The Rev. Principal Hing, D.D.

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EXAMINED.

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THE REV. PRINCIPAL KING, D.D.

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It may be admitted that no conception of Christianity is even approximately correct, in which ethical considerations do not obtain a large place. Obviously the person of Christ must be central in the system of truth which bears His name ; and no view of His person can be maintained in harmony with the gospel narratives, in which the moral element, as distinguished from the metaphysical, is not made prominent. One may hold with the firmest conviction of their truth, the facts of Christ's supernatural birth, His resurrection from the dead, and the presence of constantly recurring miracle in His ministry, and have besides a due sense of the great though varying significance of these facts, and yet maintain that they do not constitute the chief glory of that wondrous life. We seem to be justified in saying, in the light of the four gospels, that the

supreme glory of Christ for us, the highest which we are permitted to discern, as distinct from that in which we can only believe, is His abiding consciousness of God and of oneness with Him, His entire devotion to God's will, even when that disclosed to Him the cross with its shame and pain, His intense and untiring compassion for the sinful and the suffering ; that it lay more in His possession in absolute perfection of qualities which we may and should share in part with Him, than in the supernatural attributes which are exclusively His own.

And while this is true of Christ's person, the same principle, the supreme importance of the moral, holds good of His work. No view of it can be maintained in the light either of the Gospels or of the Epistles, which does not make the deliverance of men from sin and their restoration to righteousness its great aim, which does not find the end contemplated by both His teaching and His sacrifice, in the conquest of evil in those whose nature He had assumed, and in their transformation into His own likeness. "I am come," He says, "a light into the world, that whosoever believeth in Me, should not abide in

darkness," the darkness, that is, not so much of ignorance, as of the sinful life. His benediction is ever seen falling on "the pure in heart," on those who "hunger and thirst after righteousness," on "those who hear the word of God and keep it." They are kindred with Him; He speaks over them the endearing names of "brother and sister and mother," who "do the will of My Father which is in Heaven." He begins His ministry with a summons to repentance: He closes it with the supplication "I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. Sanctify them through thy truth."

Thus the moral is everywhere present as the end at which He aims. The spiritual, indeed, if we may make the distinction here, is ever found by its side. The end includes the recovery of man to God, no less than his recovery to goodness; or, keeping still closer to the teaching of the Gospels, the restoration of God to the life as well as its renewal in righteousness. He is "the way" to the Father, whom He reveals, whom He alone fully knows.

The means likewise of which we see Him making use to accomplish this end are in part at least ethical—teaching, example, the charm of personal goodness, the sweet compulsion of love. But along with these, what seems a different kind of instrumentality comes into view. His life is offered up as “a ransom for many ;” His flesh is given for the life of the world ; His blood is shed for the remission of sins ; He is the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world. Even here, however,—here very specially—the moral element is present. The sacrifice has to be construed in terms of obedience, and not of suffering simply, before it can be understood. It was the complete surrender in dying, of His will to the will of God. In it obedience was consummated. “He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” Nay, the faith itself, which the Saviour everywhere demands as the condition of saving blessing, is distinctly moral. They who are “of God,” who “have heard and learned of the Father” exercise it. They who have been hardened by insincerities, they who “receive honour one of another and

seek not the honour which cometh from God only " do not and cannot exercise it.

One may even admit—ought probably to admit—that there is a clearer discernment, a fuller recognition of this side of truth in our day than in many former periods of the Church's history, and that the writings of some, from whom on many cardinal points we would be obliged to differ widely, have contributed to this desirable result ; for desirable it is. The new emphasis laid upon the person of Christ as the embodiment of absolute goodness in human form, as compared with the undue prominence sometimes given to the more abstract conception of His transcendence, His divinity ; the distincter recognition of the moral element—the element of obedience—in His sacrifice ; the greater importance attached to character in professing Christians as distinguished from standing : these are to be reckoned, I believe, real and, one may hope, permanent gains. But it is not possible, on the other hand, to shut one's eyes to the fact, that there have arisen contemporaneous with this advance and, in part at least, in association with it, very real

dangers to the Christian faith, in the suppression, or in the positive rejection, of truths which the Church of Christ has asserted with almost accordant voice from apostolic times, and on the proclamation of which not a little of its power has seemed to depend. We are threatened, as observant persons can scarcely fail to see, with a gospel that is purely ethical, ethical and nothing more ; a gospel which makes Christianity simply a new moral dynamic introduced into the race ; the Sermon on the Mount being its complete rule, and the person of Jesus Christ, the new force securing obedience to it in the life. I propose in this lecture to state and to discuss this modern and, for the time being, popular type of religious teaching.

A purely ethical Christianity assumes, as we might expect, for error is protean, different forms. In its most extreme, but perhaps also most consistent form, Jesus Christ is simply a man, but a man wholly filled with the sense of God, absolutely one in feeling and will with God. His existence as an actual conscious being commenced at his birth in Bethlehem, not sooner. His pre-existence accordingly except as an idea in the Divine

mind is denied, as having no warrant in the gospel, and His resurrection from the dead, as an actual objective fact, is also, though less positively, set aside. His divinity, for the word is still used, is made to consist in the absolute perfection of His humanity—a humanity so unique and perfect, that it embodies and mirrors with absolute truth the moral attributes of God, His purity, His justice, above all, His love and mercy. The saving work of Christ consists in His revelation of God, His revelation of Him especially as Father, and as universal Father. This revelation is made in His teaching, in His life so full of a divine pity, and most impressively of all in His death on the cross. This death has the same kind of significance with His life, and no other. It constituted no expiation for sin. None was needed. To make it in any degree the ground on which God proceeds in exercising forgiveness, it is said, were practically to subvert the whole teaching of the Saviour regarding the Father. Accordingly, the sacrifice of Christ can have no reference Godward. It atones, for the word is still retained, only in the sense of putting sinful men under the solicitations

of love, of quelling their guilty dread of God and changing it into confidence, and in this way reconciling them to God. Thus the redemption of man by Jesus Christ is a purely moral task, and it is accomplished by purely moral agencies. His tender and lofty, even while entirely human, personality, His example of utter devotion to the will of the Father, His course of patient unceasing human service, or ceasing only when life itself had been surrendered, are the new forces which serve to accomplish this redemption. This is the view of Christian truth, which is presented to us to-day by not a few distinguished scholars on the European continent. It is the view of it which is taught from the chair in Halle, from which over forty years ago, it was my privilege to listen to the thoroughly evangelical and profoundly spiritual teaching of Julius Müller. The hope may be cherished, that English-speaking Christians have not as yet in any great numbers adopted it in its entirety, but he is not an observant reader of the literature of the day, who does not see approaches, and not inconsiderable approaches, to it all around.

The form of the purely ethical gospel, with which the Church of Christ on this continent and in Britain is threatened both differs from, and agrees with, that just sketched. It differs from it, in holding the pre-existence and proper Deity of the Saviour, and in maintaining, or at least not denying the fact of His resurrection. On the other hand, it almost entirely agrees with it, in its conception of the nature of human salvation, and of the manner in which it is accomplished, and in its conception, too, of the Fatherhood of God. According to the view taken by it, God is the universal Father ; the Father of all men and in the same sense. As a correlative truth, all men are sons of God. Dr. Watson says :—" 'Jesus' message was 'you are a son.' As soon as it was believed, Jesus gave power to live as a son with God." Salvation consists entirely in transformation of character, in the attainment of righteousness, in the victory of the higher part of the nature over the lower, the triumph of reason over impulse, of love over selfishness, in the acquisition of the Christ-mind and the embodiment of it in suitable action. And this is accomplished in the main (it is diffi-

cult to say whether and how far any distinct supernatural agency, that of the Holy Spirit is recognized ; the system indeed seems complete without it,) by the natural influence on men, of the lofty and gracious teaching of Jesus Christ, of His example, in which we are permitted to witness the charm and the blessedness of the unselfish life, the spiritual gain which comes from the surrender of all for others, and of His death on the cross, as the consummation of obedience, and the crowning manifestation of love. Supreme importance is attached in this connection to the person of Christ. He is the Saviour of the world, first and most, because He can love sinners, even the vilest, and can make sinners love Him with a passionate devotion. "The passion for Jesus has no analogy in comparative religion ; it has no parallel in human experience" ; and in His power to evoke and to sustain this passion, lies the hope of salvation for the individual and of security for the church. To love Him is to love righteousness, for He has identified righteousness with Himself. To love Him, is to love goodness, for He is its embodiment in human form. And to love righteous-

ness, goodness, is to be saved, is salvation at least begun. That this is a fair representation of this school of thought may be seen by another quotation or two from a recent book, coming to us from the distinguished and fascinating writer already named. (In quoting Dr. Watson, in this connection, we do not wish to be understood as affirming that his whole view of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the purely ethical one, but in "The Mind of the Master" it is the ethical side only which, as far as we can judge, finds a place.) Speaking of the Saviour's sacrifice, the writer says:—"He himself had come to serve, and He declared that His sacrifice of himself would be the redemption of the world. This is Jesus' explanation of His death. It was an act of utter devotion to the will of God, and a power of emancipation in the hearts of His disciples. As they entered into His spirit, they would be loosened from bondage and escape into liberty." Again, "The cross is the symbol of self-renunciation and self-sacrifice, and is Jesus' method of salvation. It is the secret of Jesus, the way

which He has himself trod, and by which He leads his disciples unto God."

Now it may be readily admitted, that there is much that is both true and important in the account of Christianity thus presented, and indeed that some aspects of the truth receive fuller justice in it, than in many statements of doctrine more satisfactory as a whole ; but one need not hesitate to say that, viewed as a full statement of the Gospel, it is seriously and painfully defective, if it does not indeed change the centre altogether, and thus throw even the truths which it retains out of their proper relations.

It claims indeed to be a return to primitive Christianity, to Christianity according to Christ as distinguished from Christianity according to Paul or John, as some of its bolder advocates do not hesitate to put it. But while claiming this, we believe it can be shown to do much less than justice, even to the personal teachings of Christ in the Gospels, and this at more points than one.

In the first place it is difficult, if not indeed impossible, to

reconcile its doctrine of the universal Fatherhood of God, and the correlative doctrine the common sonship of the race, with the Saviour's use of the terms, Father and Son. For myself I do not find a single passage, in which one can claim with any degree of certainty, that Christ makes use of the term Father, except when speaking either to disciples or of them ; or to put the point more definitely, I do not find one in which, addressing men not disciples, He says " your Father," or speaking of them, He says " their Father," and yet on the supposition of the universal Fatherhood of God, how pertinent, how appropriate it would have been to do so. In point of fact, the preachers who take this view of the Fatherhood, constantly use this language in addressing men avowedly unconverted, and most naturally. On the other hand we do find Christ, in addressing the unbelieving Jews, saying in explicit terms, " If God were your Father ye would love Me." One shrinks from touching in such a connection the matchless parable of the 15th of Luke—the parable that discloses a love which has melted so many hearts to penitence, and brought so many

wanderers from the wastes of sin to God's feet. It is and must ever remain the assurance to men of a love in the heart of God, which goes out towards them however far they have wandered, which yearns for their return, which will greet that return with joy ; a love *like* that which a father feels for his prodigal son. It were a kind of treason against the race to take any view of the Saviour's teaching here, which would dim or throw doubt on this love ; but to found on the passage, parable as it is, in the face of the considerations above adduced, and especially of the Saviour's declaration quoted, a doctrine of the universal Fatherhood of God—a Fatherhood of the kind implied in such words as “ Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of these things,” “ Fear not, little flock ; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom ”—is surely a procedure of the rashest and most uncertain character.

The correlative doctrine of the common sonship of the race, is in still more obvious conflict with the teaching of the Gospels on the subject, especially with the words, “ As many as received Him

to them gave He the right (R.V.) to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name, which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.' It is true, these are not the words of Christ, but they are the words of John, not to say, of the Holy Spirit speaking by him. They embody the view of sonship taken by the disciple who lay on Jesus' breast, and who, even apart from special inspiration, may well be supposed to have understood his Master's mind ; and according to that view, it is a sonship of believers, of those "who are born" "of God." After all, how little does any other, any common, sonship signify, except indeed as carrying with it the possibility of this highest one? A sonship that should be common to the unregenerate and the regenerate, to the sinner and the saint, to the wicked seducer and his innocent victim, how little would it mean to those possessing it ! This could not possibly be the sonship, the contemplation of which led the apostle in a kind of ecstasy to exclaim :—"Behold what manner of love, the

Father hath bestowed on us, that we should be called the sons of God !”

Again, this modern theology fails, largely as a consequence of its doctrine of the universal Fatherhood, to do justice to the teaching of the Saviour on another point, that of man's condition under the Gospel but out of Christ. According to this teaching, men are not only sinners, they are under condemnation or judgment (John iii. 18), the wrath of God is on them and abides, (John iii. 36). Now it is not claimed, that this view of the sinner's condition would be explicitly rejected by the purely ethical preacher, but it is safe to say, that it is very seldom presented by him, if indeed at all. The guilt of sin, as distinct from the sinful disposition and the sinful character, and the wrath of God as distinct from the natural penalties of wrongdoing, are with this school of thought, unfamiliar if not unknown terms.

On another subject, and that one of the greatest moment, the purely ethical gospel leaves to the side aspects of the Saviour's teaching of supreme importance. It is surely im-

possible to read the Gospels without noticing, that a special significance is attached in them to the death of Christ. It does not take rank along with His teaching, or His miracles. Terms are employed regarding it, which are not applied to any other action or event in His life, or to the same event in the lives of other persons. It is not so much a bitter experience which He suffers, as it is a sacred function which He discharges. It is "the decease which He should accomplish at Jerusalem." It is an issue foreseen, predetermined by the Father. He has a commandment to lay down His life. There is a need-be in His sufferings. "It behoved (the) Christ to suffer." Other men are born to live, a longer or a shorter period; in a very real sense He is born to die. "For this cause came I unto this hour." And moving forward to the death of the cross, He institutes a special ordinance to perpetuate its memory "till He come." In keeping with all this, a significance is ascribed to it which is not ascribed to His incarnation, to His teaching, to His ministry of healing, or even to His resurrection from the dead. His life is laid down for the sheep. Its

surrender is a ransom by which many are redeemed. His flesh is given for the life of the world. He is "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." More explicit and decisive still, His blood "is shed for many for the remission of sins," words which could convey no other meaning to men, familiar, as these disciples were, with the Old Testament doctrine of sacrifice, than that of blood shed to secure, as its direct object, forgiveness. No doubt, a moral influence goes out from the cross of Christ to soften human hearts, to win men to penitence, but no fair interpretation of the Saviour's words here could make their reference to be to this influence. They connect the remission of sins with the shedding of the Saviour's blood in such a way—in a way so direct and immediate—as of necessity to give to His death the character of an expiatory sacrifice. The purely ethical view of the Saviour's work, that which finds in His death on the cross, only a new and more impressive manifestation of love, fails therefore to do justice to His own teachings on the subject, comes far short of accounting for the unique place which, as we have seen, that death re-

ceives in the Gospels, for the saving significance which is attached to it, and especially for the direct relation in which it is set to the forgiveness of sins ; not to add that it makes, on the supposition that Christ is Divine,—not the Son only, but the Eternal Son—His appointed endurance of death a greater perplexity than ever.

In all these respects then, in its doctrine of a universal Fatherhood of God, in its all but absolute silence in regard to guilt and condemnation, and especially in the view it takes, or rather fails to take, of His sacrifice, a purely ethical gospel is, on the grounds stated, untrue to the Saviour's teachings in the Gospels, misreads at really vital points that consciousness of Jesus in which, according to the style of speech of the age, we are to find the whole contents of the Christian faith.

But if a purely ethical Christianity is in conflict with the personal teachings of the Saviour at various points, and these points of vital moment, to say nothing of the fact that it takes no account at all of what He did, as distinguished from what He said, it is still more obviously in conflict with the teaching

of the Apostles The points of difference are too numerous to be discussed or even to be, all of them, specified in this lecture. We shall select two or three of the more important. We pass over its doctrine of a common sonship of the race, in the Christian sense of that term, as too plainly opposed to Pauline and Johannean teaching to require argument. It is enough to state, that with Paul, they are sons of God, "as many as are led by the Spirit of God" and no more, and that with John he is a son who is "begotten of God," who is a sharer in the new life imparted in regeneration.

But passing without further remark over this unmistakable but at the same time highly important difference in the teaching of the Epistles, and in that of the purely ethical gospel of the day, we would ask attention to the widely differing views which they take of man's natural condition as a sinner. No reader of these Epistles, of Paul's especially, needs to be told in what dark colours that condition is painted, how complete and, apart from Christ, how hopeless is its bondage to evil, how wide or rather universal is the ruin which sin has entailed.

Sin is with them not a mere weakness, a simple defect, it is a virulent disease, which has affected every part of the nature, darkening the understanding, corrupting the affections, hardening the conscience ; it is a dread enslaving power, which has seated itself at the very centre of man's being, and which Christ alone can dethrone. And again it is not simply a depraved tendency in the nature which may be reversed and so brought to an end, it is a series of acts which draw after them guilt and condemnation and wrath. With the Apostle John, "the whole world lieth in the evil one" ; the unregenerate are "the children of the devil." With Paul, "all the world is become guilty before God." Men out of Christ are "dead in trespasses and sins," are "children of disobedience," and consequently also "children of wrath." They are servants *i. e.*, slaves of sin, and "the wages" of that service is "death." They are "alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them," "far off," "without God and without hope in the world," nay even "enemies," "lost" or at least in the act of becoming lost. But it is unnecessary to

multiply quotations to prove that to the Apostles, one and all of them, sin was a dread and loathsome presence. To Paul even, the man of outwardly blameless life, it was "the body of this death", under which he groaned, and the prospect of deliverance from which through Jesus Christ, called forth his profound, almost passionate thanks to God.

Now it would be unjust to charge all, or, so far as English-speaking countries are concerned, perhaps any very large number of the teachers and preachers of a purely ethical gospel, with ignoring the fact of sin altogether, or, what comes very near to this, with holding that view of sin, which makes it simply a necessary stage of development, through which the individual as the race has to pass, in order to reach something higher ; a natural, temporary, perhaps not wholly inexcusable triumph of the lower over the higher part, of impulse or passion over reason ; but it is safe to say that the teaching of very many, indeed of the class as a whole, on the subject of sin, is not set to the key-note supplied by the Epistles ; that sin is not with them the utterly vile, criminal, God-defying and God-

estranging thing, which it is with Paul and with John. The view of it presented is moral more than it is spiritual, and to that extent it is superficial and inadequate. More is said by teachers of this school of thought about the beauty of righteousness, than about the deformity of sin, and more is said about its deformity, than about its guilt in the sight of God. It is viewed as the degradation of the man, the ruin of his moral nature, rather than as the dethronement of God in the life and its subjection to His displeasure. It is seldom indeed set in relation to God and to His law, and accordingly the notes of disobedience or transgression and of guilt,—the prevailing ones alike with Paul and with John,—are seldom or never heard.

Nor let any one imagine, that this is a mere matter of nomenclature and therefore of no great importance after all. On the contrary it means that the very deepest and most appalling aspects of sin are either thrown into the shade or left out of view altogether ; namely, the alienation from God which is at its heart, and which every act of sin tends to deepen, the

righteous displeasure of God which it incurs and the penalty with which it is threatened. A view of sin so very defective cannot be without its evil consequences. On the one hand it impairs the depth and earnestness and spirituality of the Church's life, and on the other it almost necessarily vitiates her doctrines of grace, of regeneration and of atonement. If a man's thinking is at all consistent, his doctrine of sin will in large measure determine his whole view of the redemptive work of Christ ; the former being in this case so seriously defective and unscriptural, the latter may be expected to show defects and deviations from Scripture correspondingly grave.

This is at once seen when we direct attention to the doctrine of salvation, as taught by the purely ethical school, and examine it in the light of Apostolic teaching. According to the concurrent teaching of the Epistles, men are saved, not so much by the influence of Christ's words and of Christ's example, not so much even by the all-powerful charm of His gracious and wonderful personality, though their importance is everywhere recognized, and their effect is constantly coming into view, as

by His death on the cross and by His intercession in the heavens. The cross has become central, and it is a cross on which He not only perfects obedience to the Father and conquers the world, but on which He also bears our sins. He is presented not only as the sinless One, but as the sinless One made by God sin for us "that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." To Paul who had not known Him in His earthly life, as to John who had companied with Him, He is indeed the type of perfect goodness, the embodiment of suffering but triumphant love ; but the fact is never forgotten, comes distinctly into the foreground, that " God hath set Him forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood." He ever comes into view throughout these Epistles. as at once the crucified and the risen One ; and as the Crucified, He is crucified, not only for us, but specifically " for our sins," He is " delivered for our offences." As the risen One, He is " raised again for our justification." " In " or through " His own blood, He " has " entered once into the holy place," " now to appear in the presence of God for us." To this two-fold fact,

the sacrifice on the cross, the intercession in the heavens, as taking up and applying the merits of that sacrifice, our deliverance from condemnation, and ultimate and complete salvation are ascribed. We are "justified by His blood." "We are reconciled to God by the death of His Son." "We shall be saved by His life." In Him "we have redemption through His blood," and as the very kernel of this redemption "the forgiveness of sins." "Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." No one can possibly doubt that the Apostle John grounds the believer's hope as a sinner on the same foundation. "If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and He is the propitiation for our sins." He, too, speaks of love, the love of God; it is his constant theme on which he delights to dwell, but it is not simply a love which melts the sinner into penitence and transforms dread into confidence, it is a love which "sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

Now it would seem to be quite impossible to reconcile the view of salvation thus presented, with that taken of it in the purely ethical gospel. In the latter it is sin as an enslaving power, on which attention is concentrated ; guilt can scarcely be said to obtain any recognition : in the former, guilt is that with which God in accomplishing our deliverance primarily deals. In the one, the cross is a discipline into which we are initiated, or, along with this, a great and impressive manifestation of divine love ; in the other, it is in addition and indeed before all else, a sacrifice for our sins. In the one justification is by character, by faith indeed, but by faith as carrying in it the promise and potency of a moral renovation ; in the other, it is by the merits of the Saviour's sufferings ; " by His blood." In the one, salvation is first changed character, and then as the result of this, changed standing ; in the other, it is first changed standing, " made," *i. e.*, constituted " righteous through the obedience of the One," and thereafter and in part at least as its result, changed character, made personally " righteous as He is righteous." There are surely antitheses there, which no

ingenuity can overcome—differences which it is beyond the power of any mediating theology to reconcile—and yet they refer to matters which concern the very vitals, not of Christian doctrine only but of religious life as well.

I would call your attention to one other difference closely connected with the preceding, which, however, the limits assigned to this lecture do not allow me to elaborate at any length ; I mean in the views taken of the nature of divine grace and the sphere of its operation. According to the teachings of a purely ethical theology, divine grace is the grace of the Father in giving His Son, “that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life,” and the grace of the Son in laying down His life for men, and in standing ready to assist them with His heavenly succour, grace most precious, but of a quite general character, concerned more with the impetration of redemption, than with its application, and carrying with it no suggestion of efficacious power. One cannot turn to the Epistles without at once finding the sphere of grace widened and its operation specialized

and intensified. Paul has to speak not only of the love which God commends towards men in that while they were yet sinners Christ died for them, and of the love which Christ exhibited in laying down His life for the ungodly, in which all are invited to share, but also of a personal love of which he has found himself to be the object—"Who loved me and gave Himself for me." The grace of which he is never tired of speaking and the exceeding riches of which fill him with adoring wonder and gratitude, is not that alone which was exhibited in the condescension of Him "who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor." It is very specially grace which is exercised in calling one and another out of darkness into light, in regenerating the soul, in uniting it by faith to Jesus Christ and thus making it a sharer of His life, and in carrying on the whole work of sanctification in the believer, so as to make him "meet for the inheritance of the saints in light"; a grace which is at once sovereign and special. And so we come upon such expressions as these, "God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me by His

grace" ; " By the grace of God I am what I am " ; " Who hath saved us and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His purpose and grace." As a result of the relation in which divine grace is thus set to the calling, the conversion and the sanctification of individual believers, spiritual life is seen to be a divine bestowment, a supernatural attainment and not a product of education, of culture, of happy environment simply. That is what it is according to the whole tenor of Apostolic teaching ; not a development of already existing elements, not a growth simply, but a new creation ; not an elevation of a moral kind—natural forces are quite adequate to accomplish this—but a resurrection. "And the spiritual resurrection of a soul belongs to nature just as little as does the bodily raising of a corpse." Here the great word of the Apostle holds good, "All things are of God" ; not only the divine Saviour, but the union of the believer to Him, "For of Him ye are in Christ Jesus."

In the ethical teaching so prevalent in our day we encounter an entirely different and a much lower note. Nature almost

entirely usurps the place of grace, God recedes, man advances. The beginnings, the germ so to speak of spiritual life, it is said, is in us all, in that natural kinship with God in which we have been formed. It needs development, it needs culture, but these are well within our own power. Now that God has come near in Jesus Christ His Son, now that Christ has gone before in the path of loving obedience and of gentle, human service, we have but to follow. Get His mind, say they, act on His principles, take up His cross, keep on at this and in the end all will come right, the heaven of His promise will dawn on you. So far as concerns the engendering and the sustaining of, what we have been accustomed to name, the life of God within the soul, the supernatural, except in the incarnation and person of the Eternal Son, either maintains a doubtful hold or is absolutely set aside in this school of thought.

The essential weakness of this teaching, in which neither sin, nor sacrifice, nor grace, receives adequate recognition, is instinctively felt. One could not expect it to issue in numerous conversions, or in a piety of any great depth or earnestness.

Where it is in the ascendant, religious life will be apt to droop, or to degenerate into something little better than a moral cult. The saving thing connected with the form it has assumed in our day, is the high place which it gives to the person of the Saviour, the manner in which it seeks to root morality in devotion to Him. This must ever be a redeeming feature in any system, however otherwise imperfect, and it may well prevent the purely ethical teaching of to-day being so disastrous to religious life, and in the end to morality itself, as was the Moderatism of Scotland, with which it has some affinity, a century ago. The claim is even advanced, that in this respect—in the emphasis which it lays on the moral rather than the metaphysical perfections of Christ, on His human compassion rather than His divine power, in the urgency with which it inculcates the duty and privilege of loving Him, in the belief which it cherishes that His person can kindle a passion of devotion, that will in time cleanse the soul of all impurity, and in its readiness to peril everything connected with human destiny on the presence of love to Him, without reference to

perplexing points of doctrine, it has the advantage of orthodoxy itself. To this it is only necessary to reply, not only that there is no incompatibility between apostolic doctrine on sin and atonement and sovereign grace on the one hand, and love to Christ on the other, but that this doctrine seems even requisite to give to the believer's love to the Redeemer that quality of reverence and adoration by which, as distinguished from mere human affection, or at least in a far higher measure than in the case of human affection, it should be characterized. Instances in any number might be adduced in support of this contention. The case of Paul himself will occur to everyone. It is the author of the Epistles to the Galatians and to the Romans, with their insistent assertion of the doctrines of original sin, of propitiation through the sacrifice of Christ, of release from the curse of the broken law, by His bearing it on the tree, who is the example of a devotion to the Saviour, such as may have been approached, but has certainly never been surpassed since the Apostle's day. It is the man who says : "Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God,

through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand," who also says, "To me to live is Christ." "I count all things but dung that I may win Christ." "The greatest of these is love." The Scottish theologian, Samuel Rutherford, whose letters overflow with a passionate, yearning, self-accusing love for Christ, such as it would be difficult to parallel, is one, the very heart of whose theology is found in the familiar lines, "I stand upon His merits, I know no other stand, Not e'en where glory dwelleth, In Immanuel's land." And the preacher in our own day, whose steadfastness in the maintenance of Apostolic doctrine has been equalled by few and surpassed by none, Charles Spurgeon, was not less marked by his warm, intense love of the personal Christ than by his strenuous hold of the doctrines of grace.

It is not the weakness of the Ethical Gospel, however, as an instrument in converting and saving men which this lecture was designed to discuss, but its deviations from New Testament teaching, that of the Epistles especially. It has been pointed

out that these deviations are not few, and assuredly they are not unimportant. On the contrary, they touch the very vitals of the Christian faith, the character of which they largely change, so much so indeed that, while honoring as one may well do, the worth and the learning of some of the more prominent advocates of this gospel without atonement for sin, it is difficult to refrain from applying to it the words of Paul in his letter to the Galatians, "Another gospel which is not another," or, as the revised version, with greater fidelity to the original, renders the clause—"A different gospel which is not another." For myself, if I could believe that it was to become the prevailing type of teaching with the Churches of the Reformation, I could anticipate nothing else than their signal and continuous decline.

The bearing of the acceptance of this purely Ethical gospel on the question of the inspiration of the Epistles will not have escaped attention. Whatever arguments may be advanced in favour of its accordance with the personal teaching of the Saviour, its divergence from that of the Apostles would seem

to be undeniable. Many of its supporters are candid enough to admit this ; others are naturally loath to come to such a conclusion, but sooner or later it must be accepted. This is not the least alarming feature in the case. The acceptance of this modern gospel means the denial of the inspiration of the Epistles, in the sense in which inspiration implies authoritative teaching. Nay, it means even more. It implies that the Apostles, Paul especially, misunderstood the work of Jesus Christ—gave it a character fundamentally different from that, which He Himself had meant it to assume. In any case their writings, even if valuable and suggestive aids to the interpretation of the Saviour's person and work, no longer speak the final word on the subjects to which they refer, are no longer invested with authority to determine the contents of the Christian faith. It is in the personal teaching of Christ, as contained in the gospels, and in that alone, that we are to find the unerring standard of truth and duty ; and this, notwithstanding the fact that He had Himself expressly declared that teaching not to be final :
 “ I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them

now " ; and had in addition given His disciples the promise of the fuller teaching of the Spirit.

It will be for you, gentlemen, resuming the study of theology, or entering on it for the first time, to address yourselves in a reverent but independent spirit to the study of this question and of others cognate with it, first satisfying yourselves as to the inspiration of Scripture as a whole, and then setting yourselves carefully to determine its meaning. When you have discovered this, when you have come to definite conclusions on Christian doctrine, whether as laid down in the gospels or in the Epistles, it will be safe for you to "hold fast the form of sound words." In any case, if you depart from that form, which we must all more or less do, if you seek to present the gospel in the form in which it would be most readily apprehended by the modern mind, if, to use the phrase of the day, you endeavour to translate it out of the categories of Paul and John, into the thought-forms of our age, you will need to be very careful that in the transference you do not lose that in it, which has made it "the power of God unto salvation."



